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Framing Made Simple

I get many inquiries about framing watercolors, so I thought this tip may help. These directions are appropriate for any work on paper, not just watercolors.

Good paper manufacturers do everything they can to make a product that will last centuries if framed, stored and displayed properly. Modern watercolor papers are generally acid free and buffered, which help combat deterioration and discoloration over time caused by exposure to light. But, they are still PAPER, and works on paper need to be protected from other environmental conditions besides light (smoke, dirt, grease, bugs, mold, mildew, water and other liquids, scratching or accidental cuts etc.). To provide that protection, watercolors and other works on paper are normally framed with glass or sheet plastic glazing.

When framing, you can spend as much or as little as your budget allows. Part of the cost (and perhaps the largest part) will be for the frame itself. Frames can be very simple or very ornate, machine made or carved by hand, metal or wood, painted, stained or gilded with gold or silver leaf. Styles can range from classic to contemporary. You can purchase frames that are already put together (usually in just standard sizes) or you can buy frames that come in pairs that you put together yourself. Or you can take your painting to a professional framer, and they will do all the work after consulting with you about the look you want.

The other components of framing — the glazing, mat or mats, and the backing board and/or back cover paper, involve choices too.

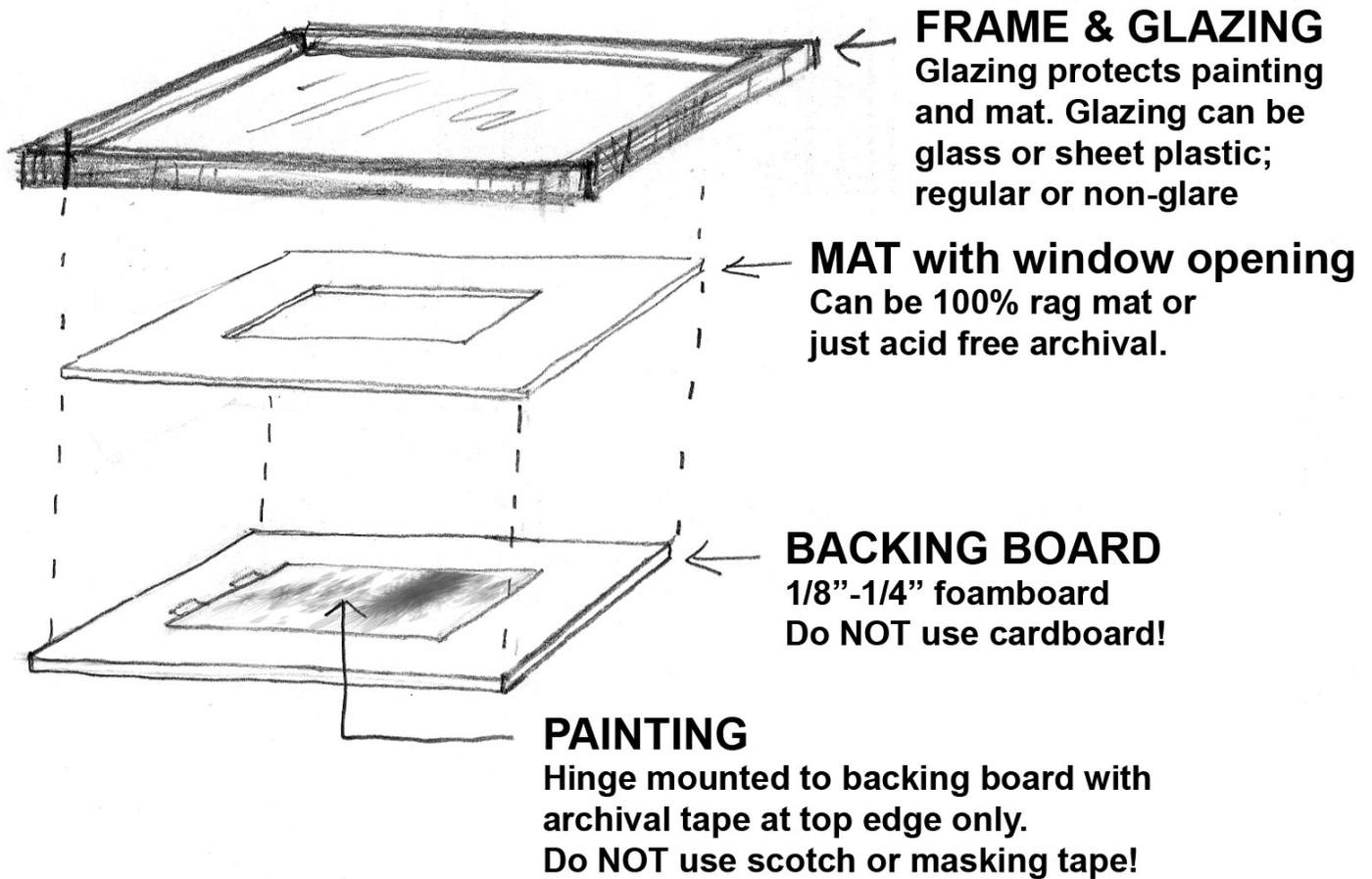
The thick paperboard border with a hole (or window) opening cut in it that allows the painting to show is called a mat. Paintings can have single or multiple mats, in nearly any color you can imagine. Professional framers usually choose mat color(s) that complement a color or two in the painting. Mats can be fabric covered, metallic looking, embossed, and even painted on. You can choose regular mat board that has an acid-free paper on the back side (where it contacts your painting), or museum/conservation mat board that is 100% rag and completely acid-free. Aside from their decorative function, mats serve an important purpose. They provide a critical little air space between the surface of the watercolor painting and the glazing. When glazing sits directly on your painting surface, changes in humidity can allow mold or mildew to form on the paper surface - something you definitely don't want to have happen!

Besides a mat, your painting will also need protection and support from the back. That is provided by a backing board. Foamcore board is commonly used as a backing for watercolor paintings. You can get it in various thicknesses, and choose between regular and archival foamboard. Because the backing board comes in direct contact with your painting, you never want to use regular cardboard or chipboard as a backing. These materials are acidic, will deteriorate very quickly, and contaminate the paper your painting is on too.

Finally, depending on the frame style you choose, you may wish to add a heavy paper dust cover or backing cover to the backside of the framed painting. Dust/backing covers are normally done only on wood frames. Paintings framed with metal do not usually have a dust cover as it is difficult to glue paper to a metal frame, but you can buy an archival self-adhesive aluminum frame sealing tape that works with metal frames. It goes partly on the flat back of the frame and partly onto the backing board, and effectively seals the back of the painting, protecting it from dust and bugs.

This is the general order of putting together your framed painting. The backing board goes on the bottom, with the painting attached to it with archival tape hinges. The mat or mats, cut to the same size as the backing board, goes over the painting, with the painting centered in the window opening. The window should be cut about 1/8" to 1/4" smaller than the dimensions of the painting, so that when the mat is laid over the painting and backing board, its edges are covered by the mat. Finally, the glazing and frame go on top. The whole "package" of backing board, painting, mat and glazing is held together by the frame.

Once everything is put together, wire is attached to the back of the frame so that the painting can be hung. Wire is usually placed 4-6" down from the top of the frame.

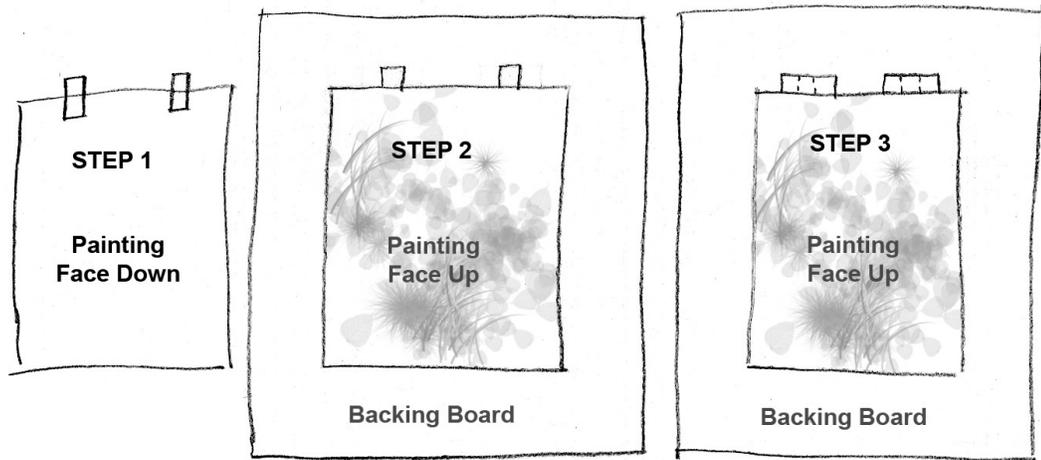


Light, contaminants and time are the enemies of paper, and the wrong materials coming in contact with your painting can hasten its deterioration dramatically. Backing should be foam board or archival corrugated board (usually a blue gray color), and never plain cardboard. Mats should at least be acid-free, and museum grade all-cotton rag mats are even better. Hinging materials are just as important, and you should never use scotch tape, masking tape, painter's tape or anything that is not archival. Best are rice paper hinges glued on with methylcellulose or another Ph neutral glue. I usually use an archival self-adhesive linen tape for hinging. It's made by Lineco.



There are several methods of hinging (or attaching) your painting to the backing board, and below is the method I generally use unless I am “floating” a painting, in which case I will use the second method.

Some artists hinge their work to the mat instead of the backing board as it is easier to get it centered in the window opening. The procedure would be the same whether attaching your painting to a mat or to a backing board.



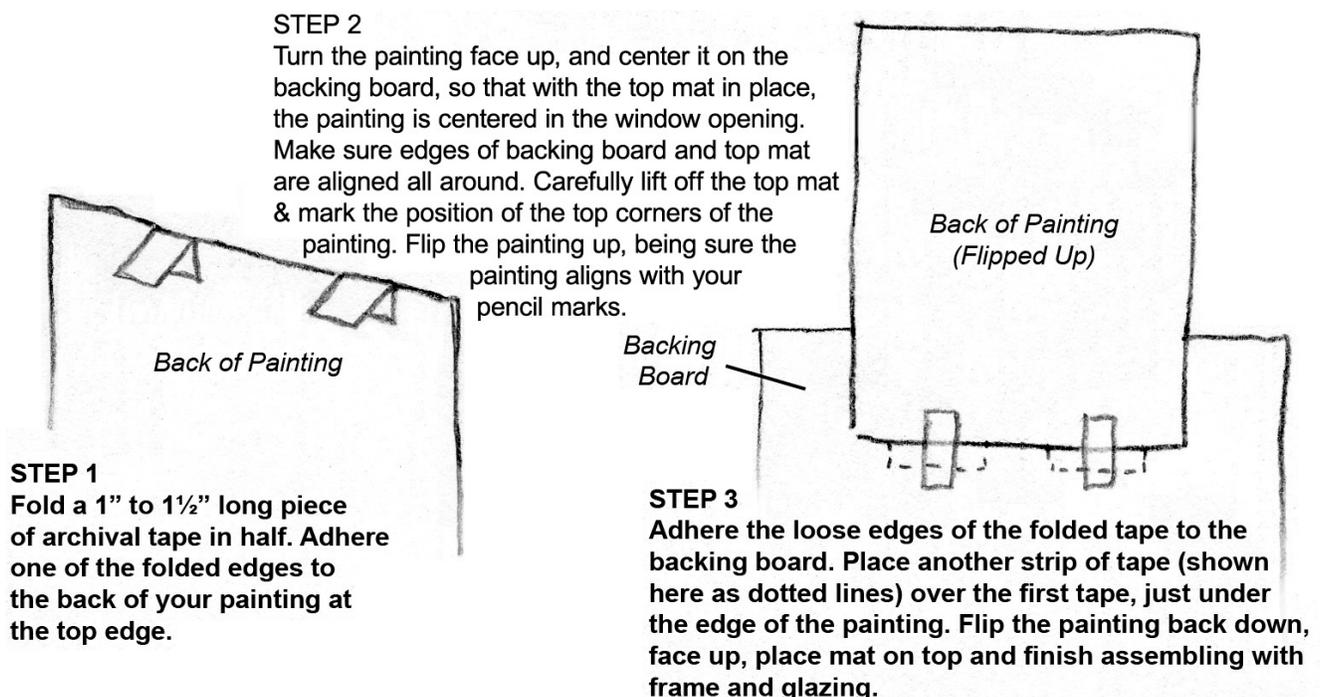
Step 1 - Place your painting face down on a clean surface. Using archival linen tape or equivalent material, cut two (or more for large paintings) strips from 1” to 1-1/2” long. Affix the tape to the back of your painting so that about half of it extends above the top edge of the painting.

Step 2 - Lay your mat with the window opening on top of your backing board, and with a pencil, mark all four corners

of the window opening. Make sure the mat and backing board are squared up (aligned all four sides) before you make these marks. The marks will help you place your painting so that it will be centered beneath the window opening of the mat. Now place the painting so that it is centered over the four corner marks (note - you won’t be able to see the marks once the painting is placed correctly - the idea is that the painting is larger than the window opening in the mat - so when the mat is place on top, it covers the edges of the painting.

Step 3 - When the painting is in the correct position, Use two additional pieces of tape and place them horizontally over the tape tabs that extend above the top edge of the painting. In Step 3 below, the tabs are represented by the dotted lines. These second pieces of tape secure the painting in place. Now you can lay your mat and glazing on top, and place the assembled package into your frame.

This is the alternate version I use for hinging art when I want to float the painting. You might want to float any work that is on handmade paper or paper that has interesting deckle edges. When you float a painting, the mat window opening is cut about 1/4” larger than the dimensions of the painting.



STEP 2
Turn the painting face up, and center it on the backing board, so that with the top mat in place, the painting is centered in the window opening. Make sure edges of backing board and top mat are aligned all around. Carefully lift off the top mat & mark the position of the top corners of the painting. Flip the painting up, being sure the painting aligns with your pencil marks.

STEP 1
Fold a 1” to 1½” long piece of archival tape in half. Adhere one of the folded edges to the back of your painting at the top edge.

STEP 3
Adhere the loose edges of the folded tape to the backing board. Place another strip of tape (shown here as dotted lines) over the first tape, just under the edge of the painting. Flip the painting back down, face up, place mat on top and finish assembling with frame and glazing.